

The Oldest Living Universalist Tells All

Delivered on the Occasion of the Sesquicentennial Soiree of the First Universalist Church of Minneapolis

McNamara Center at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis Campus

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April 18, 2009

Happy 150th Birthday First Universalist Church! To be with you tonight and on this special weekend is one of the highlights of my 31 year ministry. My mother and father would be very pleased that we are all together this evening. I miss them very much at this moment, just as I miss all those Universalists and Unitarian Universalists who came before us and helped to make this the special church this is. But looking out over the audience tonight I realize there are a whole lot of us who did make it to this point and you'll know who I am talking about you when I ask, "How did we get so old?" It is a bit disconcerting for me to see my family members' pictures in the history section of the church's website.

This is an evening to express gratitude. And there are plenty of people in this room who deserve my thanks, beginning with those who have issued such a wonderful invitation and provided your gracious hospitality. Your ministers, Kate and Charlotte, and your 150th Committee's contact person, Nancy Atchison: none could have been warmer or more accommodating. They embody the temperament of this community. It always has been so. I've known as such ever since I was "christened in the name of Jesus" in the sanctuary on 50th and Girard fifty six years ago. I still have the certificate. The officiating minister was Dr. Carl Olson.

I was born into the church nine years before the Unitarian and the Universalists merged their associations in 1961. I plan on living quite a long time, yet. And if I can hang on long enough I think I can achieve my goal of being one of the last living, and therefore, oldest, born Universalists. Hence the title of my remarks this evening: "The Oldest Living Universalist Tells All." I do admit that the merger really took a firm hold on me. Like those who finally dream in a second language, I've been dreaming in "Unitarian Universalist" for a really long time. But tonight I return to my first language, "the Universalist language." I use it to tell a portion of the story of First Universalist Church, how it lives in my heart and in my hands, and to say something about it's promise for the future and to name this congregation's role in bringing that promise to fulfillment.

In the late forties, my parents were uncomfortable Baptists and Methodists whose search for a religious home led them to First Universalist. They discovered something here that was perfectly tailored to the kind of people they were. There were specific beliefs that were promoted that caught their attention and made sense to their 20th century, modern selves. The idea of universal salvation was one. They could never reconcile themselves to the god of their youths who would sentence innocents to an eternity of damnation. The idea that there is truth in all the great religions was another. They could see that there were commonalities among the world's traditions that could not be ignored. Beyond those specific beliefs, it was a church that engaged their minds, allowed them to question and doubt, encouraged them to translate their beliefs into action. Indeed, it held that one's actions showed more about a person than the belief system to which they subscribed. And equal to all that, it provided a community for their children and for themselves.

My sister Hope is here with us tonight. She says the same thing that I do, "For the Barker's, family and church were nearly one and the same, often indistinguishable from the other." I remember seeking my mother's approval by doing a bang up job in Sunday school class. She was especially pleased with the way I had dressed a clothespin to look like Joseph in his amazing coat. I remember being absolutely gleeful when the family drove home from a Friday night church square-dance. Magic had happened that night as the family swung to and fro in the basement of the church. I remember my sisters and me yanking on my parents' arms as we sought to drag them away from coffee hour so we could get home, change clothes, and meet our church friends for Sunday afternoon play.

It wasn't in the curriculum, but we learned something about the embrace of universal love in those early days. The power of love and nurturing had a larger than life feel, almost a divine feel, and it put us into the realm of one of those earliest Universalist beliefs, that God was loving and nurturing, and had no wrath to dispense at all.

My mother served as the Church's Director of Religious Education for a few years while I was in elementary school. It was the coolest thing that could ever be. She had an important, prestigious job in my eyes and it seemed to bring us into a special relationship with the Cummins family when they arrived in Minneapolis in 1963. The Barker children and the Cummins children were roughly the same age. We hung out in each other's basements, slept over at each other's homes, and kept up our friendships through our high school and post-high school years. It was on the Cummins' television set, on a Sunday after church, that I saw Jack Ruby shoot Lee Harvey Oswald. My sister Hope watched President Kennedy's funeral there the very next day. Looking

back, it was a pivotal weekend in my life. I was 11 years old. It was when my church, my relationship to the Cummins and the opening up to the larger world of imperfection and injustice began to gel into one; the result was a beckoning toward ministry. And it was the beginning of the transition of my primary relationship from the Cummins children to the Cummins' parents.

This church taught my father to live out his truth and ironically, accepting that truth led him away from his church. In 1964, our family moved from Minneapolis to St. Cloud Minnesota so my father could follow his dream of becoming a school teacher. He was in his mid-50's when he left behind his life in business and sales to take the family north where he could join the faculty of the local high school.

In our own way, our whole family became pillars and leaders of the Unitarian Fellowship there. My sister and I founded its local chapter of liberal religious youth. During those years, my minister was always John Cummins. The fact that I lived seventy miles away and never went to the church didn't have anything to do with that. My minister was John Cummins.

He was never far from my mind, especially as I proceeded through my high school years and was forced to think through my attitudes toward war and killing. The war in Southeast Asia was on. I was nearing draft age and I found myself echoing the words and thoughts I had heard him say: If war was right, then Jesus was wrong in his instructions not to kill. If killing was right, then the Ten Commandments were meaningless. It wasn't just about that particular war. It was about all war. Searching my conscience and the lessons of my youth, I came to realize that I couldn't avoid becoming one of those persons who must uphold a vision of absolute peace for humanity, even when the avoidance of conflict is not immediately expedient.

I wished it were otherwise. I was a Universalist kid, which by definition meant I knew everything. I guess that meant I even knew the odds were against me, that I would not be recognized as a conscientious objector by my local draft Board. But I also knew that my minister had taken an even more courageous path when he declared himself a conscientious objector during World War Two. It still boggles me. It still blows me away that he was able to take such a stance at such a time in history.

I was 17 when I drove to Minneapolis to talk to him, to ask for his advice and request a written reference that I could send to my Draft Board. He made an offer to me that I still remember. John said, "Lee, if you want, I'll go to your draft Board hearing with you." His ministry and this church have been as inseparable to me as my family and

this church. And so when he made that offer it was as if all of you and your forebears made the offer to accompany me.

When I was in college at the University of Minnesota and he took me to lunch to talk to me about the possibility of going to seminary (something I'm pretty sure was his idea before it was mine), it was as if the church were guiding me in that direction. When there was some resistance on the part of the school to accept this 21 year old kid from Minnesota, and he went to bat for me with the admissions people, it was as if this whole church made it their project to show the world my potential. And when Dru, always in my mind an important part of the ministry of this church, pushed my name forward to Unitarian Universalist officials to give me a role in theological education when my ministry was just beginning, it was the church that pushed me forward. And when John and Dru, by then retired, cared so lovingly for each of my parents in their final years, it was as if the whole church brought to them its tenderness and compassion.

On May 21, 1978, it was the whole church, The First Universalist Church, that ordained me to the ministry. I can assure you the values that my mother and father found here are the values that still form the values of my ministry.

Some Universalists, who are longer tenured in the tradition than I am, lament we all but lost Universalism in the merger with the Unitarians. They argue that the organization of the Unitarian Universalist Association embodies a Unitarian ethos, that the churches from the Universalist side tend to be smaller and less urban than those that came up from Unitarianism, that only three of the largest UU congregations are Universalist, Denver, West Hartford and, of course the largest of all, Minneapolis. I can't argue with the evidence, but I do come to another conclusion. You see, as a Universalist I have to say that ultimately, it is not the survival of institutions that is the end goal of our perspective. I say that as an unabashed institutionalist, who believes in the power of institutions to transform lives and whose vocational life has been to strengthen the institutions I've been privileged to serve. But Universalism is more than an institution. It is an orientation. It is a way of being on the planet. The perspective and the way of Universalism are more than merely alive. They are growing. A couple of examples:

Of the hundreds of people I have talked to who are new to Unitarian Universalism, and who have come from more orthodox traditions, there are a precious few whose doubts did not spring out of their universalist understating of salvation. There have been a myriad of themes, but generally it goes like this: I started to question my Christian upbringing when I was told that I will go to hell if I don't believe

this or that...you fill in the blank. I just couldn't believe that this loving God that was being lifted up would be so unforgiving. Or that God was so caught up in our human destiny. Or that maybe there isn't now a God....all the questions start with the most obviously unreasonable...the issue of universal damnation. It is universalism that brings so many into Unitarian Universalism today.

Another example:

My daughter Ava is seven years old and is in first grade. I know I'm too old for such wonderful nonsense, but it's true. She goes to an extremely diverse school. It is a Roman Catholic School. My father would not be pleased. Here was her day a week ago Wednesday. She started in the morning with a Mass for all faiths, then she went to religious class where she learned about the life of the Buddha, then I picked her up and took her to the UU student Vespers service at First Unitarian Church. Then we went to a friend's home for Seder. It was the first night of Passover. She is having a much different religious childhood than I ever had. She is having a childhood that is much more engaged across the spectrum of religious faiths. And there are millions of kids in America these days who are leading the same kind of life. They never heard the word "Universalism" but they are living out its principle of finding truth in all the great religions.

Nothing is certain, of course. And nothing is guaranteed to continue forever. There are always forces that are trying to restrict religious tolerance and that seek to snuff out the most liberal ideas. As the world grows closer, the possibility for mutual understanding grows exponentially, but so grows the possibility for increased tension and misunderstanding. Knowing that, First Universalist has a special obligation. This is the largest church in the world rooted in the principles of Universalism. No other community has quite the same Universalist impulses, quite the same Universalist strength. You are leaders. You are showing the rest of us how to do it. And that means you can never be satisfied with who you have been or who you are. And I believe, that means, being a voice for that which connects religious faith and tradition, across cultural boundaries and across geographic boundaries.

It is work that calls for delicacy. We want to be conscious of the differences we have with others, for to ignore differences is to ignore the full humanity of the other. But we are also living in an age in which similarities are too often ignored in deference to our differences. These days at least, if Universalists do not hold up commonalities, no one else is likely to. And if we Universalists are going to do that, then we must be willing to engage in relationships, true relationships, with the other...across cultural boundaries, across geographic boundaries.

As Universalists, we can't just believe it to be good to be in those relationships. We can't just act locally and think globally. We have to actually **be** in the relationships.

A couple of years ago, my wife Kris and I were in Tokyo and took a side trip to a place called Konko Town. Konko Town is headquarters to a Japanese religious movement called Konkokyo which means the Konko faith and with which Meadville Lombard has had a historic relationship. We decided to go because the relationship had started to sag a bit with fewer and fewer Konko ministers coming to Meadville Lombard over the years.

Konkokyo was founded in 1859 by a farmer who came to be known as Konko Daijin. He was the first spiritual leader of Konkokyo. He came to devote his life to matters of religion as a result of two experiences: First, the accidental death of several family members when their home was under construction, and second a debilitating illness from which he believed he received a divine cure.

The Konko faith has many common elements with Shinto. It is, after all the religious culture out of which it grew. Each names Kami as that which is most sacred and holy. And each prays to Kami. But unlike Shinto, Konko has churches, rather than shrines. It has ministers, rather than priests. Today, Konkokyo has a similar relationship to Shinto that Unitarian Universalism has to Christianity: historic and cultural and confused.

Konkokyo sees everything as being in relation to everything else. I mean everything. One book describes the depth of this attitude through the example of a porcelain tea cup which is described as being made from "the blessings of the universe, such as earth and water and heat and air. It has been created by forces of the universe coming together to do its work and if it breaks, a portion of the universe has broken." Human suffering and calamity results when individuals do not heed that relationship between all things...even the accidental breaking of a teacup is a sign that relationship is being ignored.

The current spiritual leader of Konkokyo is the great, great, great, great grandson of the religion's founder. He was elected to his position, as head of the movement, upon the death of his father nearly seventeen years ago. Elected yes, but it was his to lose. It is the tradition of filial and male succession. And spiritual leaders' son, himself Meadville Lombard alum, will one day take the role of Spiritual leader.

Each morning, three hundred and sixty five days a year, in a small town in western Japan, spiritual leader walks in a processional from his home to Konkokyo's headquarters' church some blocks away. It happens every morning at 3:45, no weekends, no holidays and no days off. And every morning, at 3:45, people gather to witness it. They bow their heads as he walks by honoring him for his great service to God and humanity. This is not an easy life that was thrust on him and they are grateful that he has accepted it with such grace.

When he arrives at the church he conducts worship and serves as mediator between the people and Kami. Literally, he sits in a chair in what we would call the chancel. He sits there for 12 hours every day, meeting with anyone one who would like an audience. That was where my Kris and I first met him. Taking a side trip while we were in Japan, we went to see him hoping that we might be able to attract some Konkoko ministerial students to the seminary. On our knees, bowing before him, we were so intimidated. He seemed so stern. We were bowing before him. We were flustered as we offered him a traditional gift. I expressed my hope that seminary students from Japan could continue to come to Chicago to study with us. In clear English, he responded, "Well, that is not anything I have any say about."

Our guide was a young Konkokyo minister, a Meadville Lombard alum. Later that day he gushed with excitement when he told us that Spiritual Leader would join us for dinner that evening. "This is very unusual," he said. "May I ask, please what gift did you bring him?" I told him it was simply a glass paperweight with the skyline of Chicago etched upon it. I could tell from his face that was not the reason for the honor.

So that night we were joined at dinner by Spiritual Leader and a handful of church officials. We made small talk and asked about families and mutual acquaintances. He was sitting right across from me; not nearly as stern as he had been earlier in the day, but it was the same spiritual leader. Then without forewarning, one church official, also a Meadville alum, said; "Lady and, Gentlemen (there was only one lady, this was Japan, after all). "Lady and Gentlemen, I give you Abraham Lincoln." I was totally confused until Spiritual Leader began reciting, word for word, the Gettysburg Address. I used to live near Gettysburg. I know quite a bit about the battle and Lincoln's speech. We were talking about that when Spiritual Leader said, "How would you like to do Karaoke tonight?" I didn't know what he had in mind, but I was pretty sure I didn't want to do it. "We would love to," we said. Two minutes later, mid-mouthful practically, we were in a car on our way to a bar called Snak Shop.

When we arrived we were told to wait in the car. Two members of our party had been inside and told us that it was very crowded inside. A minute later a dozen patrons were ushered out. We went in where Spiritual Leader took us to his usual table. We were served food and drink and, then he was given a microphone. He said something in Japanese to the very attentive hostess, sat back closed his eyes and sang, with dead on accuracy, "Love me Tender." I'm serious. You would have thought Elvis were in the room. There were a few more songs and plenty of laughs among us. And those who

drank, drank lots more. This was the more relaxed spiritual leader. And Kris and I kept giving each other the “can you believe this is happening look?” The only one among us who was more surprised than us was our young guide, who told us later, “I have never seen Spiritual Leader so happy.” This even took into account the fact that Spiritual Leader sang one final song, Danny Boy, which he dedicated to his son who had died at just twenty six years old. And then the night came to a close.

I had to process all of this. And I was still processing it at 3:45 the next morning when Kris and I stood in the cold air waiting to honor Spiritual Leader as he made his way from his home to the church where he would spend another day in service to his God and his people. We went to see him one more time in the church that morning and that was where he told me that he hoped more people would be able to come to Meadville.

That affirmation never would have been elicited through a letter, or if I had sent an emissary, or if we were friends on Facebook. It came from the power of human face-to-face interaction, from him seeing us in our humanity, from us seeing in him the same. It came from being in the relationship.

First Universalist Church, if we are to carry forth the Universalism that has been given to us over the years, if we are going to take it to the world that needs it so urgently, you will need to lead the way.

It certainly has been a successful first 150 years. Innumerable challenges have been faced and innumerable challenges have been met. The challenges in the next 150 are likely to be more daunting, if for no other reason that they are not specifically known. But this church lives in the knowledge that it does not have to be buffeted about by those unknown challenges. This church has the comfort of knowing that many of your challenges will come as a result of your leadership role in serving the larger purposes of Universalism. To meet **those** challenges you move well beyond any current tendency to act locally and think globally. You will take your steps beyond the Twin Cities. You will take your steps beyond the state of Minnesota. You will take your steps beyond the United States of America. You will be engaged with the people of the larger world, demonstrating to one and all that Universalism will always carry a lively hope for earthly salvation. And it can always remain so, long after the day that the oldest living Universalist dies.

And Universalism will not die when the oldest living Universalist dies.